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ABSTRACT

One of the central themes in marketing's consumer research has been that of isolating various desired product attributes that determine consumer purchasing patterns. The best way to identify determinant attributes, however, has become the subject of a controversy that has yet to be resolved. Overall, marketing researchers have generally embraced the multi-attribute nature of consumer decision bases, and have approached both the consumer decision process and satisfaction or dissatisfaction with a product or service from an attitudinal perspective. Thus far, however, results of empirical studies have proven disappointing and inconsistent. One reason marketing studies have not proven more fruitful is that a large number of studies have been based on social models developed by and for social psychology and provide little guidance for marketing studies. In the absence of agreed-upon theory, investigations frequently differ in model conceptualization, semantics, measurement and analysis methods, criteria, and conclusions. Another difficulty is the lack of agreement concerning precisely what is meant by consumer satisfaction. This absence of uniformity in definition, plus the lack of empirically verifiable approaches to investigation, make it clear that, although some effective research has been conducted, continued research is necessary. (Seventy-three references are attached.) (NH)

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A REVIEW OF MARKETING'S EFFORTS TO DELINEATE AND EMPIRICALLY VERIFY CONSUMERS' PRE AND POST DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES

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A Review of Marketing's Efforts to Delineate and Empirically Verify Consumers' Pre and Post Decision-Making Processes

The foundation for much of marketing's rationale concerning the process involved in making choices was introduced in a 1959 study by J. F. Bolger. He measured consumer ratings of companies on several attributes and compared ratings given by the consumers to attributes he designated an "Ideal" company would possess. All of the attributes were considered equally important and the author acknowledged they were chosen on a subjective, not scientific, basis (Bolger, 1959).

This concept gave impetus to interest in isolating various desired product attributes and the idea became one of the central themes in marketing's consumer research. In 1971 Alpert took issue with the idea that all attributes are equally important to the consumer. He theorized that some are more powerful than others in determining consumer purchasing patterns and designated those attributes that determine consumer preference as "determinant" in a consumer's decision-to-buy (Alpert, 1971).

Alpert was not alone. Sharp and Granzin articulate the tone of the majority of emergent investigation into attributes when they assert, "Since

potential customers focus their greatest attention on determinant attributes, these attributes hold the key to successful marketing strategy" (Sharp and Granzin, 1974, p. 39).

The idea of determinant attributes has been widely accepted in marketing research, but the best way to identify determinant attributes emerged as the subject of a controversy that has yet to be resolved. Over the years many attempts have been made to try to determine how consumers combine perceptions of product attributes into preferences (Sharp and Granzin, 1974; Hauser and Urban, 1979; Keeney, 1981; and others), but agreement has not been reached and no method has yet demonstrated empirical validity.

Overall, marketing researchers have generally embraced the multi-attribute nature of consumer decision bases and have approached both the consumer decision process and satisfaction or dissatisfaction with a product or service from an attitudinal perspective (Bettman, Capon, and Lutz, 1975; Holbrook, 1978; Mizerski, Golden and Kernan, 1979; and others). Thus far, results of empirical studies have proven disappointing and inconsistent (Crespi, 1971; Jacoby, 1978).

It has been suggested that one reason marketing studies of attributes have not proven more fruitful is that a large number of the studies have been based on social models--especially Fishbein's. These models were developed by and for social psychology and some feel they provide little guidance for marketing studies. Wilkie and Pessemier note that:

> The pointed debates...highlight the involvement of marketing researchers in summative attitude models of the type proposed by Rosenberg and Fishbein. Interest in the area is increasing; over forty marketing studies have been reported in the past

> three years. Although it is now clear that marketing applications have substantially altered the formulations originally employed in social psychology, it is less apparent that market-studies themselves differed significantly. In the absence of agreed-upon theory, investigations frequently differed in model conceptualization, semantics, measurement and analysis methods, criteria, and conclusions." (Wilkie and Pessemier, 1973, p. 429)

Hensen agrees it is at least partially because of the models' structure that few marketing studies have been successful in delineating desired characteristics. He asserts that most of the studies that deal with desired characteristics agree attributes must reflect consumer perceptual dimensions rather than directly measurable or controllable characteristics (Hensen, 1976).

To distinguish the attributes actually utilized by consumers when evaluating options, the term "salient attributes" has been adopted, and the scholarly literature reflects widespread acceptance of this concept. However, the correlation between attributes designated as "important" and those determined to be salient is problematic. Results indicate expected correlation has not been established. In fact, one study reported a Spearman rho correlation of -.06 as the result of testing the relationship between salient and important attributes (Wilkie and Pessemier, 1973). However, efforts have continued to be made to verify the premise that attitudes in some manner influence behavior. As one model after another has proven inadequate to test this premise, new ones have been introduced or revised (Engel, Blackwell, and Kollat, 1978; Bettman and Zins, 1979).

As consumer researchers broadened their horizons and knowledge, their conceptualizations of the choice process and its implications extended beyond the scope of the consumer's pre-purchase decision process to include elements of post-purchase behavior. One such concept that has only recently emerged as a major topic of concern is that of consumer satisfaction or dissatisfaction (Hunt, 1976).

While the concept of consumer satisfaction has long been fundamental in marketing (Kotler, 1976), it has only recently been recognized as having increased importance within the consumer behavior research field. Hunt postulates that one explanation for the late recognition and slow conceptual development of consumer satisfaction and its measurement has been the lack of cross-fertilization of ideas among researchers in the area. He points out that as late as 1975 the lack of adequate conceptualization and measurement of consumer satisfaction appeared to be due, in part, to the fact that researchers and writers in the area were unaware of each other's works, each thinking he or she was pioneering in the area (Hunt, 1977).

The concept itself is seen by some as the barrier. Czepiel and Rosenberg assert: (emphasis by the authors)

> As <u>a term</u>, consumer satisfaction does have semantic and observational validity. It shares a common meaning which most use to describe certain behaviors and inferred states of being. However, as <u>a concept</u>, at the level of thought, the understanding of satisfaction becomes weaker. In a simple sense, it lacks substantive meaning--that immediate sense of being able to transfer to another exactly what it is that is known and experienced, how it can be experienced, why it is important, and how it

is a thought worth sharing and doing something about. (Czepiel and Rosenberg, 1977, p. 93)

Yet another issue centers around lack of agreement concerning precisely what is meant by consumer satisfaction. Among the many definitions of consumer satisfaction are: "the extent to which products and services are meeting clients' needs and wants so that they enhance their own and/or society's well-being" (Andreason, 1977, p.11); "...the interaction of levels of (a) expectations about anticipated performance and (b) evaluations of perceived performance" (Miller, 1977, p. 72); and:

> an attitude in the sense that it is an evaluative orientation which can be measured. It is a special kind of attitude because by definition it cannot exist prior to the purchase or consumption of the attitude object. In structural terms, the attitude is based on actual purchase/consumption experience. Perceptions of that experience are compared with the motivations which underlay the action, the expectations previously formed concerning the outcome of the experience, and are further modified by standards concerning desirable and normative outcomes. (Czepiel and Rosenberg, 1977, pp. 93-94)

Pfaff describes consumer satisfaction as the "inverse of the difference between the ideal and the actual combination of attributes, as defined in some kind of n-dimensional Euclidean or other space" (Pfaff, 1976, p. 40). Handy, on the other hand, prefers to delineate consumer satisfaction by defining consumer dissatisfaction. He describes dissatisfaction as:

> the gap or distance between the consumer's "ideal" attribute

combination of this product or service and the attribute combination of the product or service offered in the marketplace which comes closest to this ideal. (Handy, 1977, p. 217)

He explains that this:

> measures the perceived extent to which product and service alternatives desired by consumers are not incorporated into any specific choice in the marketplace. It focuses on market performance rather than consumers' satisfaction with different brands within a product line. (Handy, 1977, p. 217)

While at least some of these definitions seem to lend themselves to construct validity, Czepiel and Rosenberg point out an acceptable definition is "...but a starting point...addressing the...question will necessitate further conceptualization and explanation, methodological development, and managerial guidelines" (Czepiel and Rosenberg, 1977, p. 94).

The lack of uniformity in definition plus the lack of empirically verifiable approaches led H. Keith Hunt, in his opening comments at the Conference on Conceptualization and Measurement of Consumer Satisfaction and Dissatisfaction, to admonish:

> Consumer satisfaction is generally acknowledged to be a basic value sought after in our society, yet we have not been able to agree on what consumer satisfaction really denotes and we have no objective measure of either the level of satisfaction or its change. (Hunt, 1977, p. 31)

This confusion, lack of uniformity, and inconclusive results in consumer research led Jacoby to rebuke marketing researchers and publicly charge:

(emphasis by the author)

It stands to reason one should be able to critically evaluate and distinguish that which is acceptable from that which is junk. However, judging from papers which continue to be published in our most prestigious journals and from research reports which often form the basis for important marketing management and public policy decisions, it is all too apparent that too large a proportion of the consumer (including marketing) research literature is not worth the paper it is printed on or the time it takes to read.

Nearly a decade ago, Kollat et al. wrote:

> The consumer behavior literature has doubled during the last five years. This constitutes a remarkable achievement by almost any standard. Unfortunately, however, it would not be surprising if 90% of the findings and lack of findings prove to be wrong...

Unfortunately, the same frank evaluation can be made today. Unless we begin to take corrective measures soon, we stand to all drown in a mass of meaningless and potentially misleading junk! (Jacoby, 1978, p. 87)

In light of the preceding discussion, it is clear that marketing's efforts to understand and utilize the basis underlying a consumer's choice of a product and resultant satisfaction or dissatisfaction with that product has, to this point, proven less than satisfactory. However, the search continues, not only in marketing but in all of the social sciences. Persuasion is the basis for, among other behaviours, pre and post decision-making. Marketing recognizes the validity of the statement made by Miller

and Burgoon in closing their review on persuasion research: "...the case for persuasion research is as strong today as it was a decade or a century ago" (Miller and Burgoon, 1979, p. 451).

To its credit, the marketing field is continuing to conduct research in an effort to empirically establish the relationship between attitude and behavior as evidenced by consumers' pre and post decision-making processes.

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